

## CONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTERS IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S

### I SHALL NOT HEAR THE NIGHTINGALE

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#### ABSTRACT

*This research paper explores the construction of characters in Khushwant Singh's I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale. The novel is set against the background of the freedom movement in India. The novel can be comprehensively arranged into two gatherings: one Buta Singh, Wazir Chand, John Taylor and Lambardar who are ace British in their state of mind; two; Sher Singh (Buta Singh's son), Madan (Wazir Chand's son) and other understudy pioneers who are hostile to British in their demeanor. This paradox of characters is the beauty of the novel. On one hand, the novel presents the arrogant, haughty and amorous activities practiced by some characters. On the other hand, the novel is in attendance of noble, pious, and religious minded characters. This juxtaposition of characters is under study in this paper. This paper attempts to examine how Khushwant Singh characterizes the pictures of brutal, realistic, political, humanistic and social concerns.*

**KEYWORDS:** Freedom Movement, British, Religious Minded & Political

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#### INTRODUCTION

Khushwant Singh is one of India's most recognized man of letters with a universal status and respect. His accomplishment is endless as – an author, short story author, a history specialist, writer, sketchiest, columnist and statesman – which is especially adequate to set up him in Indian Writing in English as a flexible virtuoso. Till date, he is said to have delivered enormous books, an impressive number of short stories, a real history of the Sikhs, life stories of Sikh pioneers and numerous articles which justifies him as an extraordinary author. “His presentation of the real and the cosmic makes him stand as a pillar and peer among modern Indian Writers on the subject of concern to contemporary man” (Singh 2). As a writer, he is acclaimed for *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959). He is globally known for his poignant characterization and stark realism.

Characters are the core of a story. Despite the setting, the characters need to remain consistent with their identity. The essential characters bring the utmost among readers which world-building alone can't do. Normally, nothing executes a story like characters who either are poorly represented or have a feeble (or no) feeling of personality. As we see in the novel, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* all the characters represent a genuine photo of the human experience, and the implied standard of character as expressive, illustrative, and mimetic has been kept up. The authentic capacity of portrayal, which established the premise of the introduction of the novel genre, at the end, brought along the depiction of characters who, as indicated by Aleid Fokkema, “*behave[...], think[...], dress[...], and function[...]* roughly according to ways that are present in the culture in which the realist text originates” (57). The nineteenth-century, in which the novel sort set up itself as a decent type of writing, saw the

continuation of the work of novel portrayal on mimetic premises. In "The Art of Fiction", which presents an anatomy of the nineteenth-century novel, Henry James affirms the realistic orientation of the novel genre by claiming that "[t]he only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" (856). The characters in the novel, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* are also realistic and remain consistent to their identity.

Khushwant Singh's second novel, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* has a recorded background. The narration in this novel is set from April 1942 to April 1943. It was the time when the Indian loyalists were struggling to bring an end of British Raj and looked for liberation from the grip of the British rule through progressive means. Buta Singh and Wazir Chand (both Indians) are Magistrates of Punjab and report to Deputy Commissioner of the district who is British. Both of them could foresee the impending danger of rising national movement across the country. Buta Singh demanded extra police guard at his house as his work of collecting funds has caused a lot of resentment among people. One can sense the changing scenario at the ground level based on their conversation: 'The things had begun to change. Gandhi had made loyalty to the British appear like disloyalty to one's own country and traditions. Larger and larger number of Indians had begun to see Gandhi's point of view. People like Buta Singh who had been proud of being servants of His Britannic Majesty were made to feel apologetic and even ashamed of themselves. Loyalty became synonymous with servility, respect for English officers synonymous with sycophancy. (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 25)

The characters in the novel can be comprehensively arranged into two gatherings: one Buta Singh, Wazir Chand, John Taylor and lambardar who are ace British in their state of mind; two; Sher Singh (Buta Singh's son), Madan (Wazir Chand's son) and other understudy pioneers who are hostile to British in their demeanor. The focal incongruity in the novel turns out to be clear in the way that both professional British and the counter British belief systems are esteemed by various individuals from the same family. The novel is engrossed by the subject of the direct opposite among viciousness and benevolence and the idea that the main redemptive component of a circumstance which legitimizes negativity, or pessimism, of viewpoint, relies upon a solitary exhibition of giving up of one's own priorities, genuineness, and morality. The story opens on a note of brutality that reviews the religious devotion, the visualization of good self-justification, which caused and pardoned the Partition barbarities: "There should be a baptism in blood. We will have our blood baptism when the time comes". (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 2) Sher Singh and his allies are preparing themselves to root out hostile British oppressors. Before applying his gun on Britishers, Sher Singh blood bathed his gun by shooting a crane. Sher Singh has never taken any life before however as a pioneer he must set a precedent. This outcome in the custom homicide of a crane, a demonstration overflowing with representative hints. To the gathering, the murder connotes their introduction, for the sake of Sikh and nation, as evangelists of viciousness. As far as the novel's significance, notwithstanding, the imagery is unexpectedly boorish: rather than shooting a winged creature of prey - the vulture mockingly past the scope of Sher Singh's firearm - he pulverizes a safe confiding in the crane. This speaks to wanton maltreatment of the sacredness of life rule is further opened up by the crane's symbolic attributes - heavenliness, dutiful commitment, determined devoutness, martyrdom. The poor crane became a scapegoat in hands of Sher Singh as he was advised by his allies too, "Steel your heart against sentiments of kindness and pity. They have been the undoing of our nation. We are too soft." (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 4)

Even though the Buta Singh's and the Wazir Chand's were members of different religious groups-Sikh and Hindu respectively-they seemed to manage religious differences successfully by concentrating on their commonalities. The time and interests their siblings shared, and the fact that Buta Singh had "triumphed over his colleague both in the eyes of the

bureaucracy and in the estimation of the populace" (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 230) facilitated a patronizing attitude from the Singh's towards the Chand's. He got the approval from Taylor for carrying out a procession by Hindus along a well-defined route and during hours when there is no chance of disturbance which was actually prohibited in the new circular. It was construed as a sign of triumph to celebrate festivals for people belonging to different religions.

Buta Singh and Wazir Chand's children moved on from English schools thus they were individuals from - what counterparts called-the English-instructed world class. They were both hitched at an early age even before completing their examinations. Sher Singh and Madan shared political interests however they were not similarly dedicated to the freedom movement. Although Sher Singh had assumed the leadership of the group, Madan was its backbone. Sher Singh was an expressive speaker who turned into the pioneer of the Student Volunteer Corps (SVC). Madan and some other Hindu young men were a piece of a fear-based oppressor pack driven by Sher Singh. However, the individuals from the group did not include themselves out in the open gesture as much as Sher Singh. Sher Singh used clever usage of words while addressing the students in college: "Comrades, we meet at a critical time. The enemy is at our gates." He paused to let his words seep in; then he lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "Comrades, we not only have the enemy at our doorstep, but we also have enemies within our own house." He raised his voice: "Those who sacrifice the interests of the motherland for foreign countries are our enemy no. 1. They have been rightly named as the Kaumnashts- destroyers of the race." Sher Singh went on: "These are also people who want to cut off the limbs of Mother India and make another state of Pakistan. They too are our enemies." (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 43) Sher Singh persuaded that he had a duty towards his nation, Mother India. Despite the fact that he was "getting the best of two worlds- the one of security provided by his father [...] and the other full of applause that would come to him as the heroic leader of a band of terrorists" (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p.174), Sher Singh was getting to be mindful of the contrary idea of these two universes. He ended up wading through this questionable circumstance. He composed the Student Volunteer Corps at college and he was one of Gandhi's supporters of the Quit India Movement regardless of the fact that his intentions to free India were not the equivalent of Gandhi's. He couldn't help contradicting his dad, Buta Singh, as respects the British nearness in India and most - if not all-discourses identified with this theme. It is evident that Sher Singh presents two different aspects of his personality. On one hand, he is skeptical of British rule and wants freedom from Britishers and on the other hand he is afraid of the punishment. The very fact that the village Lambardar knows about him carrying the gun caused nightmare which can be seen in these lines: "He could not sleep. Four figures kept going round and round in his tortured mind. They were those of Madan, the headman, his father, and Mr. Taylor. Then he began to dream. He saw himself crossing railway lines. There were four tracks with trains coming towards him from either side. He crossed one track and a train came up from the other direction. He jumped clear of the train from the other direction. He jumped clear of the train on to the third track- only to find yet another train almost on him. He jumped clear of that too but found himself right in front of the engine on the fourth. He woke with a cry of terror and looked round for his wife. " (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p.18) Sher Singh and his friends suspected the village Lambardar as the paid police informer, so they killed him. During their first encounter with the village Lambardar, Sher Singh disclosed his identity only and introduced his friends with false names. One of his friends rightly said, "You know what these village headmen are? All informers! They would inform against their own parents to please the police. Leader, you were very clever in not letting him know Madan's name. Wasn't he?" (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 11)

The picture of Sher Singh's spouse, Champak as sex hungry is exceptional. She offers a sharp complexity to the ethical qualities encapsulated in Sabhrai, her mother-in-law. Sher Singh was married to Champak, who did not comply

with the duties of a pativrata in any aspect. She led a life of comfort and had scarce participation in daily chores as well as conversations. She was reluctant to share her marital life with the rest of the family but preferred privacy that was not so common not even for her husband. Champak pretended to be at the height of the circumstances that her position required but she did not behave as a Sikh woman should. Shunno, the maidservant, described Champak as: “our queen, our daughter-in-law, is idle all day [...] it is not good to be idle all day [...] she reads stories and listens to film songs over the radio” (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 224). She is a beautiful and tempestuous lady but her sexual urge is ignored by overambitious thoughts of Sher Singh. She utilizes all attempts and means to catch the attention of her husband. She complains about the domestic servant Mundoo: ‘I must tell you what happened today. My God! I nearly died of shame..... the embarrassment had nearly killed me.’ (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 51) But Sher Singh never paid heed to her complaints. In fact, he responded saying, “He is just a poor, underpaid boy. The condition of domestic servants is one of the most pressing problems of urban society. We work them twenty-four hours of the day, underpay, underfeed, and under clothe them. Their living quarters are filthy. They are abused and beaten at will. They are dismissed without notice after a disgraceful search of their belongings. It is scandalous. It must stop. I will stop it.’ (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 52) At one point, she even criticized about Sher Singh’s friend Madan, saying that ‘You are telling me! He’s a big rascal. The way he looked at me! My God, it made me feel as if I had no clothes on. He had his eyes fixed on my breasts all the time. I couldn’t look up.’ (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 81) Ironically, she indulged in sexual activity with the same person, Madan. It seems that Champak is left unsatisfied by her husband. She made unsuccessful attempts to incite her husband’s jealousy or to motivate him to have sex with her. However, she complies with all the duties of the woman of her status.

Madan was a well-known cricketer admired all over the country and, having become a national icon, his picture was published on national newspapers. He supported Sher Singh’s leadership though he was both “his chief supporter and rival.” Madan was married and had a son, and his wife was expecting their second child. He had not obtained his degree yet but he had been captain of the University cricket eleven for three years and played against the English, which made him a legend in Punjab. Madan was very keen on seducing women no matter who they were. He seduced Beena and had sexual intercourse with Champak, Sher Singh’s wife. Madan was very determined and showed no insecurity or fear at the time of expressing his views. He didn’t take the money back from Ticket collector in train paid as bribe to him rather he wittingly says, ‘What I give once I never take back. After all, getting British soldiers out of the train in these times is not easy. It needs a man of courage to do that.’ (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 165) After learning about Sher Singh’s release from jail, he immediately arranged a grand welcome for Sher Singh gathering students, retired Sikh soldiers, and an open car.

Sabhrui, Buta Singh’s wife, complied with all the duties assigned to a pativrata; she was a devoted wife and mother; and, even though she did not perform the house chores herself, she had complete dominion over the servants and managed the household on her own. Her son, who sometimes found it difficult to address his mother and to maintain a fluent conversation about certain topics with her, considered her illiterate. On the contrary, Sabhrui was a religious Sikh wife obedient to the Guru’s word, and faithful and compliant with the reading of the Granth Sahib. She was careful about expressing her views in front of her husband but determined enough when supporting an argument of which she was convinced. Most of the times, she prioritized her husband’s position in an argument to her children’s and her own. After a discussion between her husband and son, she asked her son “Why do you have to contradict your father in everything he says? [...] It is not nice to argue with one’s elders; you should listen to what they have to say” (*I Shall Not Hear the*

*Nightingale*, pp. 226-227). All the major conflicts, arguments and debates in the novel arose in the Sikh family bosom particularly between father and son whose "academic discussions" usually turned into "unpleasant personal arguments [...]" (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 239) which were commonly mediated and softened by Sabhrai's intervention. Sabhrai was possessed of that sixth sense which often goes with people of deep religious convictions. She had a bad dream when her daughter Beena was in danger and she thought of barging in Madan's room. Sabhrai's letter warned Beena of the consequences of premature sex. It was a wakeup call for Beena. She gave precious advice to Sher Singh during his stay in prison to not reveal his friend's name in the house of court. Sabhrai explained him saying that God visited in her dreams saying, "He said that my son had done wrong. But if he named the people who were with him he would be doing a greater wrong. He was no longer to be regarded as a Sikh and I did not see his face again." Due to lack of evidence, he was released from jail. Sabhrai knew that she is approaching close to death. She graciously calls Sher Singh and whispered in his ear: 'I shall not hear the nightingale, my son. May the Guru give you a long life?' (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 261) This also stands as the title of the novel which is quite symbolic, significant and representative.

Shunno, the maidservant, was a fat healthy woman in her fifties who had become a widow before she was twenty. She had a strong character and made the task of sharing the household chores difficult to other servants. She was a God-fearing woman who worshipped Sikh, Hindu and Muslim religions equally. The narrator described her as a woman who "[...] loved to talk, like most women of her age and frustrations [...] her sexual instincts had been sublimated in hard work, religion, and gossip" (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, p. 209). She went to peer sahib for the cure of her mysterious ailment. It seems that the novelist projects that sex desire has no boundaries of age, religion or ethics. Shunno's cure was a complete success. It is clear that they found a space to fulfill their repressed carnal desires.

## CONCLUSIONS

Khushwant Singh's language is thoroughly Indian and has many glimpses of Indianness. The description in the novel is so vivid that it creates a pre-independent Indian scenario. Sometimes he uses the direct literal translation of Indian or Punjabi proverbs, idioms, and phrases. The novel does not go beyond the obvious limits of social and political narrative fiction of contemporary interests. Its social milieu has a limited range. Every aspect of society which is reflected in the novel is realistic in nature. Khushwant Singh is a realist and modernist in the sense that he has the courage to look into the face of harsh reality and describe it precisely and objectively without any sentimentalism. Thus the novel is the reflection of social realism. He aims to see life in sociological and moral perspective, of course, is an important feature of his fiction. He is known for his stark realism and vocation of the Indian culture, especially the Sikh culture, in the novel.

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